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**University of Bath**

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## **Effective strategies for communication? Student views of a communication skills course eleven years on.**

**Abstract:** The ability of social workers to communicate effectively has long been seen as a core skill. Despite this, there has been relatively little research into how communication skills teaching is transferred to practice. This article begins by summarising current knowledge about how communication skills are taught. It then outlines possible difficulties in using a reflective practice model in practice. The model of interviewing skills taught at York University is described. Original research findings are then presented in which qualified social workers who graduated from York University in 1998 were asked to evaluate the training they received. Participants in the study were largely positive about the model taught and generally felt that they had adopted it into their own practice. Staff modelling of the theoretical model was highly valued and the effectiveness of the teaching was seen to rest in large part on the skill of the teaching staff. Participants felt that their work environments affected the degree to which they were able to practice the model. Despite this, participants felt that the model had assisted them in evaluating their own responses whilst interviewing service users in practice.

**Keywords:** Social work education, Social work theory, Reflective practice, Bureaucracy, Practitioners

### **Introduction**

The teaching of communication skills has been central to recent debates about social work education. The new degree (which replaced the Diploma in Social Work as the baseline qualification in England) (DOH, 2002), was implemented in 2003/04. It came about as a result of Government desire to modernise the social work workforce (Secretary of State for Health, 1998), but also reflected political and public concern about the perceived quality of some practitioners (Orme et al., 2009). The Department of Health's (2002) 'Requirements for Social Work Training' emphasised the practical application of skills including the requirement that students should be taught to communicate with children and adults with a range of needs. Although Higher Education Institutions were required to publish programme specifications detailing how they would address occupational standards, the methods of delivery

were left to their discretion. Following a number of high profile inquiries which again questioned the effectiveness of social work practice (Lord Laming, 2003; DCSF, 2009), The Social Work Task Force was set up by ministers to review this (SWTF, 2009). It argued that the content of the degree programme had been “too loosely determined” (para 1.19, p.18) and felt that a number of areas had not been covered in enough depth. Communication skills were one area of deficit highlighted, although no specific recommendations were given as to how such teaching ought to be delivered.

Recent papers addressing interviewing skills within social work education have noted that academic knowledge in this area is underdeveloped (Diggins, 2004; Dinham, 2006; Koprowska, 2003; Lymbery, 2003; Trevithick et al., 2004, Wilson and Kelly, 2010). There is little agreement amongst educators as to what the theoretical underpinnings should be (Dinham). Whilst the teaching of communication skills has featured prominently within social work courses (Richards et al., 2005), the effectiveness of this teaching has only recently started to be evaluated (Gibb, 2010) with educators largely adopting what Dickson and Bamford (1995) refer to as a “train and hope” (p.102) approach. Systematic reviews of the literature have found that there is little research which evaluates how students use the knowledge gained from training within practice (Trevithick et al., 2004; Luckock et al., 2006). This deficit has only recently started to be addressed by researchers who have attempted to assess this through longitudinal research (Cartney, 2006; Koprowska, 2010a; Lefevre, 2010, Wilson and Kelly, 2010).

Current interviewing skills training in the UK draws heavily on humanistic psychology and counselling models (Trevithick et al., 2004). Although the majority of teaching is skills-based, research shows that lecturers emphasise listening, attending and self-awareness as of central importance (Dinham). The ability for students to reflect on their communication skills is seen to be important for a number of reasons.

Processes of communication may often be taken for granted and may fall outside of conscious awareness. In order for effective communication to take place practitioners need to understand their own thoughts, feelings and patterns of communication (Trevithick, 2000). Developing such skills also requires an understanding of the processes of communication (Koprowska, 2010b). Although students may be encouraged to reflect on communication within their training this may not necessarily be transferred into practice. In thinking about this transfer, the context of practice becomes important.

Knowledge of how students utilise their learning once qualified is still little understood (Fook et al., 2000; Dinham, 2006). Whilst theoretical constructs may be taught in a university setting, doubt exists as to how far practitioners are able to transfer these. As students become practitioners, theory may be displaced by informal traditions of practice adopted within the field (Eraut, 1994). A number of writers have argued that 'rational-technical' approaches have become increasingly influential in UK social work practice (Parton and O' Bryne, 2000; Webb, 2001; Munro, 2011a). This approach assumes that professional judgements should be made through the application of research which is replicable and testable. In contrast to this, reflective practice is seen to come from a social constructivist position valuing ambiguity, intuition and tacit knowledge (Ruch, 2005). Advocates of reflective

practice have criticised rational-technical approaches for being rigid and procedural (Munro). Whilst such procedures are seen to arise from agency concerns about risk they are seen to discourage reflection leading to reductive judgements by practitioners (Munro; Ruch). However, whilst social workers may be subject to 'top down' constraints, informal logics by practitioners also have a role in interactions (Broadhurst et al., 2010). Thus, whilst rational-technical models and reflective practice are often presented as at odds with each other, it is important to be aware that rational-technical procedures will not necessarily annul practitioners' abilities to use reflection in practice.

The model of interviewing skills reviewed in this study values a 'reflection in action' approach in which students are encouraged to reflect on their own interviewing through use of film (Koprowska et al., 1999). Whilst students graduating from the programme stated that they valued this approach (Koprowska et al., 1999) it is unclear how far they have been able to utilise these techniques in the field. Whilst reflective practice may be valued by educators questions remain as to how far they may be beneficial in practice environments with oppressive management structures or excessive workloads (Yip, 2006). The extent to which practitioners may be able to reflect in practice may vary. Although social workers may be subject to particular forms of governance, they may choose to resist these (Evans and Harris, 2004). In addition to this, the context for practice is not static and the recent Munro Report (commissioned by the coalition Government) has promoted a greater focus on relationships within child protection work (Munro, 2011b). Lastly, practice contexts themselves may vary with the voluntary sector allowing for a more reflective approach (Richards et al, 2005).

This paper sets out to tackle two issues. The first of these relates to the concerns about a lack of theoretical rigour within the literature. Students at York University are taught interviewing skills within a systems framework in which they are encouraged to reflect on their own motivations and that of others (Koprowska, 2003; Koprowska et al., 1999). Through drawing on original research, this paper will first outline if participants trained in this approach have felt able to utilise this theory. Secondly, this paper will reflect on the way in which participants have utilised this teaching within practice settings. In doing so attention will be given to whether participant's have been constrained by practice or policy agendas.

## **Methodology**

The research was conducted in accordance with the British Education Research Association's (2011) ethical guidelines. A research proposal was approved by the Education Department Ethics Committee at the University of the West of England who held delegated powers from the University Research Ethics Committee.

Ex-students who had qualified from the York University Masters in Social Work course in 1998 were contacted by the researcher. All participants that were contacted had been taught interviewing skills according to the method outlined by Koprowska (2003). The reason for choosing this cohort was that they had been interviewed about their views on the course as part of a training DVD (Koprowska et al., 1999). The researcher had also been a student in this cohort. The research presented in this paper was conducted in 2010. Contact details for ex-students had been acquired through the researcher's own address book and the University Alumni Department. He also contacted ex-students through the social networking site

Facebook. The researcher asked all those whom he made contact with for the addresses of others who would be willing to be contacted. Seventeen ex-students from a cohort of thirty were contacted. Ex-students were initially contacted by telephone or by e-mail and were invited to take part in the project. The researcher then wrote to potential participants formally inviting them to take part in the study. Those who chose to take part gave written consent.

Participants were sent a copy of the DVD mentioned above (Koprowska et al., 1999) which had been filmed by the University of York as a training aid. Permission was gained from York University to distribute copies. The DVD provided an overview of the course. It also included an illustration of the course tutors demonstrating the practice model. The final section of the DVD featured students and staff who had taken part in the course giving feedback on the module. Participants were asked to watch the DVD and then to complete a questionnaire which had been designed by the researcher. The questionnaire asked ex-students to identify their age, gender and the areas of social work in which they had practiced. Next, it asked them for their views on the way that communication skills were taught on the course. They were then asked to consider how far they had incorporated the skills within their practice since qualifying. The next question asked how far the methods of teaching enabled them to assess verbal and non-verbal responses within practice.

Participants were then asked to consider how far the teaching enabled them to reflect on their own thought and feelings when interviewing. The next question asked them to consider whether there were any limitations of being taught in this way. Lastly participants were asked to reflect on factors had enabled them to develop their techniques for interviewing service users since qualifying.

Seventeen DVDs and questionnaires were sent out to potential participants. Fourteen completed questionnaires were received. The ages of participants ranged from 38 to 58. The mean age was 43 and the median age was 41.5. Ten participants were female and four were male. One participant was of white US ethnicity and the remainder were of white UK ethnicity. Participants had worked in a wide range of work settings. All participants had worked within statutory services at some point within their career and four of the participants had also worked in the voluntary sector. One participant had been employed as a social worker in East Timor, New Zealand and the UK, a further participant was working for a children's charity on the Ivory Coast and a third had worked in a variety of roles in the USA. All other participants had worked exclusively within UK settings. Pseudonyms have been used for participants and staff throughout.

### **Method of Analysis**

The findings were analysed using a code and retrieve approach in which data was cut up, coded and categorized (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). A qualitative data package was used (NVIVO 8) to aid this process. In order to examine the data the researcher initially coded responses into categories and sub-categories. Two broad generic categories were first identified. These were participants' experience the teaching and participants' experience of utilising the skills taught within practice. These were useful for the initial organisation of the data but were too broad to enable meaningful analysis. Further coding was then conducted within these headings. In relation to participants' experiences of the teaching, themes relating to self-awareness, participant personality, feelings toward tutors and interactions with peers



were identified. In relation to utilising the teaching in practice, themes relating to reflection, utilising the theory with service users and practice context were identified. In order to analyse the data, the researcher summarised accounts and drew diagrams to identify categories. These were useful for comparing categories of data which further aided analysis.

### **Description of the method of teaching**

The systems framework model for teaching social work interviewing skills is outlined in detail by Koprowska (2003) although a short overview will be given here. The process of teaching draws on Agazarian's systems-centred therapy © (Agazarian 1994; 1997) which comes from a psycho-therapeutic tradition. Agazarian (1994) theorises that this method ,

“approaches all living things, as small as a cell and as large or larger than society, by defining them as systems that are similar in structure, function and dynamics. This then sets up a hierarchy of classes of living systems where each class and every member in it, has a set of common factors that apply to all classes in the hierarchy; and each class and every member of each class is unique unto itself!” (p.37).

Agazarian argues that within systems-centred groups the basic unit is the subgroup rather than the individual. Rather than taking a traditional psychotherapeutic approach in which a therapist contains and interprets what is going on, the systems approach aims to exploit certain group behaviours so that they can be explored and understood.

Systems-centred therapy © (SCT) is seen by Koprowska (2003) to be relevant to the learning processes that students undertake. She argues that SCT highlights systems of group development focussing on defences against such processes as anxiety, emotion and retaliation from and against others. She reasons that a SCT

approach aims to “humanise, normalise, legitimise and depathologise” (p. 298) all aspects of human experience through encouraging group members to test their expectations. Students are encouraged to learn through the use of role play.

At the time that the research participants were at York University, three tutors taught the course. Each tutor had two small groups of five that they facilitated. The course was taught over six sessions focussing on attending, empathy, clarification, challenging, goal setting and working with difference (based on Egan, 1998).

Sessions were organised into two halves. The first consisted of two role plays of ten minutes which were filmed. Secondly, students watched the film with their allocated tutors. The feedback process began with the person who had role played the worker. They were asked if they wished to have feedback on a particular area. They were also asked for any feedback that they wanted from the service user (played by a student in the group) as well as from observers. Students were encouraged to ask very specific questions directly to the interviewee or observer. They were asked to say how they experienced the role play and were then encouraged to test their expectations against peer feedback and through what they had seen on film.

SCT as outlined by Koprowska (2003) identifies ways in which tutors are used to establish and maintain effective systems of learning. Tutors aim to “reduce any emergent restraining forces to learning” (p. 299). An example of this would be identifying bad experiences of role play in the past. Tutors are taught to manage these issues through enabling students to differentiate between past and current experiences. Where their experiences relate to the past they are encouraged to

maintain focus on the present and to alert others if such an experience occurs within the group. Another aspect of the system is that tutors provide an introductory session in which the process for the group is role played by them. The aim is to provide students with evidence that tutors are capable. It is also designed to minimise “role locks” between tutor and students (in which individuals become entrenched in traditional authority roles). In addition to this the procedure aims to reduce student anxiety through demonstration and through showing that a process rather than a performance is taking place.

### **Participants’ experience of teaching**

Participants were largely positive about the method of teaching, although . , the way in which this knowledge was incorporated was seen as being part of a wider process of development. Participants often viewed their learning as building on earlier foundations and commonly made reference to both personal characteristics and learning on the course. These were often viewed as being inter-related. In making this connection, participants were highlighting the processes through which the teaching had aided their development. That is, they identified that the course had assisted them but that the knowledge gained worked alongside a pre-disposition to work well in this area. This posed a dilemma for some participants, with some commenting that it was difficult to separate which skills had been developed through the course and which had already been learnt or were innate. However, several participants identified that the teaching allowed them to channel previous learning in new ways. For example,

“I think I have always been a fairly reflective kind of person, perhaps without realising it. What the course offered me was a really effective way using the process of reflection constructively, rather than negatively” – Christine.

Effective learning was therefore seen to be related to a process of enablement by the facilitator of the group.

Another related theme that participants highlighted was the way in which the knowledge had been retained and used by them. Some noted that they had little conscious memory of the course content or had only consciously remembered aspects of it. For example,

“Whilst I don’t consciously remember much of the theoretical base for the work (other than it was based on Egan’s The Skilled Helper and included listening and empathy) I think I have incorporated the skills learnt into all my work” – Kate.

A number of practitioners expressed surprise about the extent to which these skills had been adopted within their own practice. Whilst they were aware that they had little conscious recollection of the contents of the module, they felt that they had utilised these skills nonetheless. In addition, they reflected that they had been able to adapt the course content or amalgamate it to other models as they developed as practitioners. In making these reflections participants were frequently aware of the process of teaching on the course.

Participants expressed a lot of enthusiasm about the way that the teaching had been organised. Although they had not always consciously retained the course content, they had experienced the processes of teaching in a positive way. Practitioners noted that staff had successfully modelled this process. For example,

“The tutors were so committed to this way of teaching and their enthusiasm really shone through. They modelled the communication skills that we trying to learn” – Amelia.

An appreciation of tutor commitment to the task was a common theme, as was the way in which staff managed feelings of anxiety. As Koprowska concedes, role plays have the potential to bring about a high level of anxiety amongst students,

particularly when they are filmed. Participants often noted such feelings but believed that this had been managed constructively. However, some reflected that the method of teaching was not necessarily suited to their learning styles. For example,

“As a 'reflective learner' this task was definitely out of my comfort zone, and as someone who is or was extremely self-conscious, this was very challenging. But I do remember a certain sense of achievement and greater appreciation of the teaching method by the end of it!” – Fiona

Overall, participants commented positively on the level of staff planning throughout

the course and felt that the potential risks within sessions had been well managed.

This occurred despite some participants' acknowledged fear of adopting this method of learning.

The SCT model encourages the student group to be an “observing self-system” (Koprowska, 2003, p. 302). The model encourages group members to reflect on their performance though utilising other members of the system such as the self (through watching filmed feedback), the tutor and other members of the group. A number of participants commented that the use of video feedback was useful because it illustrated the way in which the theories taught might be demonstrated in practice.

For example:

“I think that the process made the listening/communication skills described in theoretical terms in social work literature ‘come alive’...” - Fiona

In this way, participants valued the way in which the teaching process enabled them

to understand the course content. Participants also appreciated the way in which

tutors modelled the communication skills. This was seen to be valuable by one

participant as it illustrated that different styles of communication existed and that

there was no ‘right’ way to communicate. However, a common theme was that the

effectiveness of the teaching was seen to rest on both the skills of the tutor and the

dynamics within the group. One particular tutor was singled out for praise by a number of the participants. This tutor was viewed to be warm and authoritative. However, much of the praise that she was accorded was built around her ability to utilise the theoretical model and to enable students to consider it. For example,

“Having Lian as a personal tutor was a fantastic experience, as she drummed into you the ‘is what you’re feeling fact or fiction’? She really got you to analyse whether there was any evidence to substantiate what you were thinking...” – Christine

A number of other examples were also given in relation to this tutor. Participants in the research frequently quoted theoretical concepts from the SCT model when recalling sessions with her. Conversely, not all tutors were seen as possessing the same level of skill and this had an effect on how the teaching was experienced. An example of this is given by another participant who writes,

“I think perhaps some groups got more out of it than others depending on the facilitator they had, I had a facilitator who wasn’t a member of teaching staff who I felt (after discussions with students in other groups) didn’t go into as much detail in breaking down the learning as other facilitators did” – Fiona.

In terms of feedback received from their peers, participants were generally less positive. Whilst they were able to reflect on the benefit of receiving such feedback, a number of shortcomings were cited. On the one hand groups were viewed as being too polite to each other. In such instances feedback was seen to be limited because the participants were too concerned not to offend. Conversely, hostile dynamics amongst group members might be played out through role plays. Dianne recounts,

“I also recall getting into a competition about who could be the most difficult service user, I apparently was a difficult interviewee one week so when the roles were reversed subsequently the other person tried to be as difficult as they perceived me to be”

In addition, avoidance towards difficult issues was sought through digression and humour. This was seen as a way to allay the anxiety associated with watching role plays on video. Some participants suggested that increased staff contact might have

prevented this. However, it was notable that the comments themselves reflected an awareness of group systems. This indicates that the principles underpinning the teaching had been considered by participants even if all sessions were not experienced as successful. In sessions where the group and facilitator met together, the feedback was more positive. What was particularly valued was the specificity of the feedback received (based on the filmed role play). Within this context, feedback was seen to be valuable because it enabled students to be analytical about their own practice. Participants commonly reflected favourably to questions raised by staff about whether their responses were based on 'fact or fiction'. This technique was seen as valuable because it enabled critical self-reflection. The intervention of the facilitator in this part of the session was seen to be valuable because it focussed student's attention on the communication process, whilst preventing peer feedback from becoming too personal.

### **Utilising Learning in Practice**

As mentioned previously, the effectiveness of interviewing skills teaching is rarely assessed in practice. The possible limitations of the SCT model are highlighted by Koprowska who acknowledges that the classroom provides an environment in which students are taught to reflect with "relatively little 'noise' in the communication" (p.306). She questions whether this helps or hinders students' subsequent interaction with service users. Participants in this research universally felt that the model had enabled them to reflect but also noted that they were affected by practice contexts. A number of participants highlighted certain work environments as discouraging reflection. Bureaucratic practices within statutory UK social work were often cited as a factor preventing reflection. For example, Christine noted that she

had been able to develop her interviewing skills through spending time with service users but that this was,

“often a luxury in Local Authority care management where the outcome is God, not necessarily the process!”  
Similarly, Neil highlighted challenges to effective self-reflection within statutory childcare services. He wrote,

“My experience as a children’s social worker in child protection was that self-reflection was not formally encouraged in supervision, which was largely task driven”.  
Areas of work which were seen as conducive to encouraging reflection included therapeutic environments and work settings which required workers to manage a shared case load. Much of this work was conducted within statutory services, although it occurred within specialist teams. In contrast to UK participants, the participant practising in the USA noted that the state in which she worked required her to complete a substantial amount of one to one supervision in order to acquire her clinical licence. As a consequence of this she felt enabled to critically reflect and develop her interviewing skills.

Whilst participants noted the limitations imposed by certain environments, the emphasis on reflection within the teaching model was still viewed as useful. For example, although Christine commented on the emphasis on outcome within Local Authority work, she also stated that,

“I think it [the method of teaching] gave me the confidence to sit back and take in what I was hearing. To take my time and not ‘jump in’ with comment or analysis...”  
Another participant commented that this was useful because it established good habits. She said,

“It [the teaching method] was incredibly helpful in teaching me to routinely reflect on my own thoughts, feelings and actions. I think that it is quite easy not to reflect unless you are taught to ‘get into the habit’” - Helen



Participants in the study commonly stated that the teaching methods were valuable because they had caused them to question their own internal responses. The way in which the course had encouraged participants to identify their own anxieties and assumptions and to question how these might affect interactions was commonly cited. This was felt to be useful because it had made them aware of the complexity of communication. Participants cited a greater awareness of how individuals may respond in communication and the potential meanings of this. The SCT approach also encouraged them to attend carefully to service user responses. For example,

“I would now say the only way of assessing responses of service users is to ask them what they mean by a phrase/ gesture as otherwise my assumptions take over” – Isobel

Participants tended to view their ability to work in a questioning way as a positive quality which incorporated the social work ethic of service user empowerment.

The research indicates that participants generally felt that the teaching method had equipped them to critically review trends in practice. Participants tended to reject a rational-technical approaches and the SCT model was appreciated because it did not fit into this framework. For example,

“The beauty of the method was it facilitated an appreciation of communication as an art, which included verbal/ non-verbal communication and silence.” – Neil.

Other responses indicated that participants valued the approach because it alerted

them to the potential complexity of meaning within an interview. However, it should also be noted that not all participants adopt a wholly negative view towards rational-technical approaches. For example Karen stated that,

“I find that if I am ‘too empathic for too long’ people tend to become quite bogged down in their problems whereas sometimes with a brisker, more solution focused approach; people are more inclined to talk about their strengths”.

Such quotes do not imply a wholesale acceptance of rational-technical approaches, but do indicate that practitioners may adopt solution focussed methods as an antidote to empathetic or reflective models.

When asked about limitations of the teaching, participants highlighted difficulties with peers within sessions, anxiety about role plays or commented on the varying levels of expertise amongst facilitators (see above). Examples of limitations within practice environments were less common. One participant noted that whilst the teaching provided a “good start”, using the content in the field was a step that still needed to be faced. The problem of utilising the course content was also raised by Karen who noted that:

“...I think that it is important to bring some ‘genuineness’/authenticity to any interaction to build a relationship so there are limits to how much can be taught – because some of those things do rely on something deeper and more intuitive (I think)”

Within this explanation is an understanding of interpersonal skills as not being wholly adaptable to being taught. This echoes with comments from other participants who viewed themselves as being good communicators before beginning the course. It also suggests that their development was reliant on an inner quality possessed by the individual. Another limitation noted was that the role plays provided limited insight into working with people from different cultures with one participant noting that that verbal and non-verbal responses varied across cultures and that she had struggled to assess this in practice.

## **Limitations**

There are a number of possible limitations to this study. The questionnaires were completed eleven years after qualification and reflect practitioners’ views on the

effect of the training. However, the teaching may be one of several factors affecting their responses in practice. The researcher was part of this university cohort and the participants were his peers on the course. It might be argued that this could have an effect on both the responses and interpretation of the data. In addition, participants were asked to watch a DVD which summarised the training before completing the questionnaire. This process is likely to have influenced responses in some way and arguably a different result might have been achieved if a summary of the SCT model had not been provided. However, participants were aware that the researcher was not based at York University and was not involved in teaching or promoting the SCT approach. It should also be noted that participants were asked to reflect on both the strengths and limitations of the teaching. Within their responses, they were able to outline both positive and negative aspects and were also able to acknowledge their own lack of conscious recollection of the model in some cases.

## **Conclusions**

Participants in this research were largely positive about the SCT approach and felt that it had aided them in developing the skills to become effective practitioners.

They felt that they had adopted the constructs that had been taught, although, this was not achieved in a straightforward way. When considering how their knowledge had developed, a number referred to skills that they already acquired. Their degree of conscious recollection varied. Whilst some participants had retained little conscious recollection of the teaching they largely felt (and were sometimes surprised to find) that they had integrated many of the skills into practice

Looking back on the course, participants were positive about the mode and delivery of teaching. The role of the tutors was seen as crucial. Research within social work

practice settings has found that 'theory' and 'practice' can often be unhelpfully portrayed as separate worlds (Clapton et al., 2008). Participants in this study commonly valued the way in which the model integrated theory and practice. The willingness of tutors to demonstrate the required skills was valued as a means through which application could be understood. Staff familiarity with the model was seen as a key component in helping students to integrate theory into practice. Feedback from peers was more problematic with either group timidity or hostility being highlighted as barriers to effective learning.

The research findings support in part the view that context has an effect on practitioners' ability to use reflective models. Participants working within some Local Authorities noted that the culture impeded their ability to practice in a considered and thoughtful way. However, not all statutory settings were seen as limiting reflection. A number of the participants had worked in specialist settings such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Teams or mental health Assertive Outreach Teams in which they had been able to use and develop the skills acquired. In addition to this voluntary settings and practice in other countries were viewed as less constraining. This supports Richards et al.'s view (2005) that some practice settings enable a greater degree of reflection than others, although no participants in this study echoed Yip's (2006) view that reflective practice might be experienced as harmful.. A significant finding was that irrespective of practice setting, participants valued the way in which the course had enabled them to reflect on the relationships between themselves and the service users with whom they were working. Practitioners often commented that the course had taught them to take a mental step back from the practice scenario and to evaluate what was actually going on. In doing so, they were

able to transfer the experience of the teaching process in which they had been encouraged to be an “observing self-system” (Koprowska, 2003 p. 302) into practices. They also maintained awareness that they were part of a system and that as such, their own responses might be affected by their environment. They were positive about the way the course had enabled them to question how far their internal responses were “fact or fiction”. Although the process of learning to reflect on their feelings was sometimes experienced as uncomfortable within a classroom environment, it was seen to provide them with the ability to make more rounded judgements within the workplace.

The findings from this study have a number of implications for practice educators. The participants in this research noted that whilst the content of the teaching was seen as important it was the process of teaching which enabled them to build, reflect on such skills. These findings support recent guidance from the Social Work Reform Board that educators should focus on the ‘process curriculum’, that is how the module is taught, rather than focussing solely on outcome statements. Educators should therefore be aware of the importance of the way in which they interact with students. They also need to be able to reflect and demonstrate how theory might inform such interactions. The research also illustrates that interviewing skills cannot be solely addressed through social work education. Practitioners who had been given the space to reflect felt that they had been able to develop their skills further. This illustrates the need for reflective time to be built into supervision and to build on the insights already acquired. Although some practice settings were less conducive to reflection than others, social work educators should continue to teach reflective skills as they enable practitioners to step back and question their own responses.

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